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FROM
THE MEDICAL NEWS,
July 27, 1895.

[Reprinted from THE MEDICAL NEWS, July 27, 1895.]

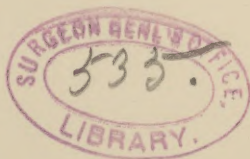
**THE MENTAL STATE AS CONDUCTIVE TO
ORGANIC DISEASE.¹**

By GEORGE S. BROWN, M.D.,
OF BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

THAT we are at present in the dawn of the age of preventive medicine is accepted by all thinking medical men; hence, the scientific facts sustaining this conviction need no elaboration and but brief mention in a paper of this kind. We recognize that as the accumulation of histologic and pathologic facts has gone on, the medical mind has grown more and more modest in its claims as to the curability of disease. This accumulation of facts has shown, first, that many diseases, from their very nature, are incurable, and at last the old egotism of ignorance entirely gives way when it is seen that all living organisms possess within themselves an inherent vital force, capable, to a large extent, of stamping out and keeping out the causes of disease. With the possession of this knowledge naturally comes the effort to conserve and further the action of this vital force by the development of these means, which are comprehended in the term *preventive medicine*.

While we have learned that death lurks not only

¹ Read before the Alabama State Medical Association, at Mobile, April 17, 1895.



in the cup, but in the bowl, the dish, and the milk-can, in the miasma of the night-air and the dust of the busy street, we have also learned that so long as the general health of the human body is maintained, its inherent vital force, through the agency of the phagocytes, is able, for the most part, to resist successfully the invasion of the germs of disease. This inherent vital force, this essence, which is the measure of the desire and ability to live, is doubtless the resulting strength and vigor of the combined sperm-cell and germ-cell at the time of conception, conserved, added to, or wasted, as it is variously affected by the million factors that influence its existence from the time of conception to old age. Every individual possesses it in a different degree, and its variations range all the way from the weaklings that die *in utero* or live an hour, week, or month after birth, to those high examples of physical and mental strength that carry on the work of the world.

The utility of this vital force may be impaired in a variety of ways. In the order of their importance they may be divided thus: First, ignorance of the mental and physical laws of right living. Second, mental shock and strain, and physical accident or exposure, which are unavoidable. For instance, a man living in perfect health in a malarial region breaks his leg. The lowered resistance of his vital force is overcome by the malarial germ, and he develops malarial fever. Mental shock may so depress the vital force as to invite the germs of disease and cause the body to fall an easy victim, or, failing that, may, by its impression on the nerv-

ous system, so disorder the bodily functions as to cause in time organic changes.

In the first class of the causes of lowered vital force (those due to ignorance of the moral laws) we need not dwell upon the fact of thousands falling victims yearly owing to the ignorance of themselves and others regarding the laws of physical sanitation and hygiene, but it is to the mental state and the position it occupies in the causation of disease through ignorance of the laws of right living that I wish to invite attention more specifically.

The human mind or brain-function probably never rests entirely, but it must have its equivalent relaxation in a healthful variety of subject, pleasurable change. The business-man, when prosperous, has the excitement of his affairs and his hours of ease and pleasure at his fireside. His drudging clerk, having no family ties, and possessing no artistic or social tastes of the higher order, must resort to cards, billiards, or worse, with others of his kind, while the ignorant negro laborer is limited for mental relaxation to the banjo, the dance, and the crap game, whisky, and the razor.

This mental relaxation, however obtained or whatever the form it takes, is absolutely essential to the healthy performance of the bodily functions. Conversely, high mental tension on any subject, continuing long enough, will cause disordered function, which will in time surely be followed by organic change. The business or professional man laboring under financial stress or overwork is a good example of physical breakdown from mental strain, but the sub-class of cases that I wish to speak of

more particularly includes women who are born with, or through long years have slowly acquired, the worrying or fretting habit. This usually begins in childhood. Under the false but popular protection-system of training, egotism and selfishness are encouraged at the expense of self-reliance and self-restraint. I beg indulgence while I report two ideal cases that I have personally encountered, and which will, perhaps, better illustrate my meaning :

A woman, aged thirty-two years, married fourteen years, with one delicate child, a boy of thirteen years, had always, as a child, girl, and young lady, been regarded as delicate, although she had never had any serious illness. Through childhood she had been indulged in every desire and protected from every irritation by an overfond and self-indulgent mother, and had never learned the meaning of self-restraint. As she grew up, her wants became harder, and finally impossible, to supply, and then the little irritations and deprivations began to cause fret, worry, and general mental suffering. Since her earliest recollection everything in the household had constantly bent to her wishes, and her mind had unconsciously taken the attitude that everything in the world should be made to do the same. Her egotism was developed ; her view was distorted by this artificial breeding, until, like primitive man, she thought the universe was made for her. When she came in contact with the world, and life became more complex, the ordinary little irritations, against which she had been protected so unwisely, pressed so thick and fast that husband and mother were unable to shield her entirely, and her mind became gradually fixed in a fret upon her woes, the least of which was more important to her than the real troubles of other people.

This woman's husband was a physician, with a good income, but spending it all in his hopeless endeavor to supply her ever-increasing demands. For five years she was an almost helpless invalid from nervous disorder, with its inevitable train of headache, loss of appetite, sleepless nights, constipation, and indigestion. It should be remembered that all her life she had had all the creature-comforts, had been protected from every extreme of heat and of cold, her stomach had never been called on to digest plain food, and, as a consequence, for ten years she had been under the high mental tension of worrying about the thousand little disturbances of muscles, nerves, and digestion that inevitably follow a habit of little physical and mental exercise, fresh air, and refreshing sleep. After five years of almost complete invalidism her husband suddenly died. She was left sick abed, with a delicate child, an invalid mother, and without a dollar in the world.

What follows proves conclusively that this woman's sum of unhappiness was due solely to her mother's mistaken notion of kindness in never allowing her daughter to learn the necessary lesson of self-reliance, and having taught her instead to be dependent, selfish, and miserable. The mother thought she was doing the best, but she really was engaged in a most vicious and immoral form of self-indulgence; she was pleasing herself, but wrecking her daughter's future health and happiness. In spite of this life of selfishness, this daughter had many friends, was attractive, educated, and highly accomplished in music, painting, and needlework, all pursuits for which she had a natural talent, and which really, no doubt, saved her life.

When her husband died, and stern necessity stared her in the face, she had a hard struggle with her pride, and no doubt suffered a great deal mentally

and physically; but whatever the effort cost her she made it, and when I saw her a year later she was keeping boarders, teaching music and painting, and making a good living for the three. Several years after that she was strong and well, had gained thirty or forty pounds, and did not have time to be sick.

This was a case of cultivated invalidism pure and simple, and, if the early conditions had been maintained for a while longer, some organic trouble would undoubtedly have followed—tuberculosis, general nervous exhaustion, or what not.

An ancient Eastern sage once said: "In the course of my long life I have often noticed that men were more like the times they lived in than they were like their fathers," meaning thereby that hereditary tendencies are overwhelmed by the influence of environment or training, when the two happen to work in opposite directions. And so in the case I have just reported. Naturally the woman, that is, her mental and physical heredity, offered the poorest possible material out of which to make an invalid. She was bright, forceful, and intelligent, with every inherent quality to make an energetic, useful member of society, which she finally became by accidentally escaping the usual final consequences of her early training.

I must beg further indulgence while I relate briefly another somewhat similar case, but in which the natural qualities were more favorable to the success of similar vicious early training:

This case also was in a woman, aged twenty-six years, married five years, with no children. The

same protective system had been carried out, first by the mother and then by the husband, until all interest in everything but her own petty ills and irritations had been blotted out. At the time I first saw her she had the appearance of robust physical health, but was in a never-ending fret about her husband, her household cares, and the thousand functional disturbances of nerves, muscles, and digestion which constantly attend, as both cause and effect, such mental states as hers ; a never-ending list of wants ; reproaches for all, in place of thanks and kindly feeling ; the interciliary ridges denoting extreme anxiety, high mental tension being never absent. This selfishness and total absence of all self-restraint and self-reliance were her masters, and although no physical disaster had yet been wrought, the result was inevitable.

Physical examination revealed no organic disorder, except a small cyst of the left ovary, which caused no inconvenience other than mental. This state of worry, of high mental tension, however, with its attendant train of bad physical habits, no exercise, no fresh air, no refreshing sleep, indigestion, headache, and constipation, and last, and most important of all, no healthful mental change, her mind on one eternal strain about herself, did the work, and five years later she died a physical and mental wreck. Seeing her again in consultation after this lapse of five years, I could recognize mental symptoms, such as fretting about trifles, which at first would have been amusing, except for the grave tendency, now grown most pitiable in the intensity of the mental anguish they caused. She had no waking moment for weeks prior to her death that was not filled with the most acute mental and physical suffering. Self-pity and most pathetic charges of injustice and neglect, which she felt to be just, she showered on all about her. These made

up her mental agony, and the long-starved-out and abused and exhausted nervous system, crying out as physical pain in every final nerve-distribution, was none the less real. She died with a frown of reproach for all who had loved her and cared for her, and the cause of her general exhaustion, I am convinced, was primarily mental.

The post-mortem examination showed beginning tuberculosis in both lungs and slightly advanced interstitial nephritis. The cyst of the ovary had grown little or not at all; there was no organic change sufficient to cause death, which was due simply to an exaggeration of the mental symptoms present five years, or ten years, or twenty years before, to a point at which the exhausted brain and nervous system could no longer furnish life to the tissues.

These two women had the same vicious early training, and but for an accident in the environment of the former the results would have been the same. The first case was not naturally so bad as the second, because the woman had natural tastes that asserted themselves, and, combined with her maternal affections, took her out of her own thoughts for hours together, thus relaxing the nervous tension, smoothing out the brow, and giving the mind an occasional much-needed rest. It would only have taken a little more time, however, to balance these advantages, and she would have gone the same road as the second. The second woman had no inherent healthy force, no tastes, no talents, although pretending to all; no attractive qualities, and, consequently, no friends, and no affection for anyone but herself. Her mental tension never relaxed,

except when overcome by sleep, and of that she had little ; consequently there was nothing to obstruct the rapid progress toward nervous ruin.

To my mind these cases tend inevitably in one of three ways : either some acute organic disease steps in and ends the struggle ; or this goes on unobstructed to the end, as in the second case ; or something occurs that brings about a radical change of habit that effects a cure, as in the first case. Case I could have been cured at any time by a little patient, judicious teaching and intelligent help. Her case was due solely to ignorance on the part of her husband and mother. Case II, with a bad heredity and no redeeming qualities, would have been a harder case to manage ; would have required, no doubt, a wise attendant and adviser from her natal hour.

In the management of these cases the intelligent physician can do much, if he will leave his saddlebags at home, and study the mental condition closely, and rely on his ability as an educator. The "Weir Mitchell" rest-cure is successful in many of the milder cases. It puts away all medicine, and excludes all garrulous friends and over-anxious mothers ; but, combined with this, after the patient's confidence has been gained, she should, I believe, be made to understand the mental source of her trouble. She must understand that not only is her co-operation necessary, but that the entire burden and responsibility of the cure are on her ; that no miracle can be wrought for her ; that there is no royal road to her cure ; that her condition is the result of long training and self-indulgence in bad men-

tal habits, and that only by long and patient work in the opposite direction can she be benefitted ; that the mistakes and evils of her youthful training cannot be wiped out by a pill or a prayer devised by someone else, but that she herself must long and patiently atone. Those cases can be cured that, like the first case I have reported, have some good left to appeal to—if that something good is appealed to, and the conditions honestly explained, to the end of gaining the patient's confidence and enlisting her co-operation ; maintaining the strictest of discipline over her, or rather helping her to do so herself, and showing a most honest sympathy and concern for her welfare, and finally throwing the entire responsibility for the success of the treatment on her. On the other hand, if she has not any stronger desire than amplifying her symptoms in order to revive the waning sympathy of long-suffering friends or to stagger the new doctor with the importance of her case, if she has no reason, tastes, or aspirations left to appeal to, or if she is over fifty years of age, and "sot in her ways," she and her friends will get more peace and happiness from a hypodermic syringe and a bottle of Magendie's solution than from anything else. Cases of this kind, which cannot be dealt with honestly, whose confidence cannot be gained nor co-operation enlisted ; in short, those who have little reason and no will-power left, receive but temporary benefit from bread-pills, hypnotism, hoodooism, charms, fetishes, and prayers. Such treatment, in fact, has made these cases what they are.

The two cases I have detailed are typical of the

conditions I wished to illustrate, but, like all pure types, are seldom met with. By far the most common form of this acquired or cultivated state with which we have to deal is a variable and ever-varying combination of the two. In brief, it is a state of high mental tension, mental overwork, brought about by a selfish, worrying habit; worse at one time, better at another, as it is influenced by the thousand healthful and unhealthful factors of environment, but, on the whole, gradually growing worse as the years of youthful frivolity, change, and excitement are replaced by the more monotonous period of middle life. This state persisting, with its accompanying indoor existence, poor air, poor exercise and sleep, dyspepsia, headache, constipation, and no mental relief, the rule is constant; the weakest point gives way to organic disease, or the patient succumbs to pure nervous exhaustion. Again, a monotonous home-life is often responsible for conditions that have in turn been charged to perversity of the liver, uterus, or ovaries. Housewives who suffer from the persistent waywardness of husbands and children, from poverty, confinement, and hard work, with no hope of relief or pleasurable mental change, in ten, fifteen, or twenty years go the way of nervous wrecks, and many wonder why.

These cases are peculiar to women, not because they have ovaries, but because they are so often the delicate hot-house pets of mothers or the unconsidered and unpitied slaves of men. In one case the girl is often completely under the vicious influence of an indulgent and ignorant mother. Her

brothers are never beyond a certain age. Neglect a boy's training in self-reliance and develop his egotism to the utmost, and one game of marbles or ball, perhaps, will knock it all out of him. The boy, sooner or later, always has companions who estimate him at his real value, and force him to accept it. They teach him self-reliance as well as self-restraint ; they inure him to personal irritation ; he sees the world as it is, and early learns that biologic principle that the individual must mold himself to his surroundings.

The girl, brought up under the protection-system, thinks the surroundings can be cut to fit the individual, and working, or rather fretting, under this hypothesis, she grows up unhappy and unhealthy, and with her ovaries threatened by every new doctor she calls. As I have mentioned, this state of high mental tension is often acquired by business-men who have allowed their affairs to grow beyond their strength to handle. Such men, ignorant of or indifferent to the laws of mental hygiene, can, by ignoring the loud clamors for rest for the weary brain, bring about that state of low physical resistance so inviting to infectious or organic disease. The physician's duty in all these cases is almost entirely educational. Such cases in men are easily treated, the condition being obviously a late acquirement. A few months of mental rest will effect a cure.

To an unfortunate woman, whose state is the result of early training, worry is more nearly natural, and to attempt to cure would be to attempt to bring about an actual revolution in her character,

and those only can be cured who have some reason and understanding left to appeal to. Let such a woman be told that she has nervous prostration, but let it be explained to her what is meant by that ; let her be shown its cause, and be impressed with all the sympathetic eloquence at the physician's command that there is no royal road to her cure ; that her improvement will be speedy or slow in proportion as she recognizes her condition ; that her physician and attendants can only remind, encourage, and direct, but not cure. She must be warned that this fixed habit, the result of years of bad mental hygiene, can be changed only after long and patient work in developing and reviving the latent and atrophied forces that still remain. Cases that have passed a point where reason, will, and understanding have been all but annihilated may eke out a tolerable existence with anodynes in a continual warfare with the weaknesses that have flourished too long.

To benefit these cases in the line I have indicated there is obviously necessary a state of confidence in the physician, and a faith in the wisdom of his view of her condition. This is difficult of attainment at all times, and after the patient has reached a certain age, or her condition a certain degree, it passes all possibility. Such cases there are, and we have all seen them, who, inheriting this tendency to worry, this lack of will-power and self-reliance and reason, and having been subjected to the ignorant and vicious protection-system of early training, followed by a procession of female sympathizers to encourage every little selfishness and physical and mental ill, and accompanied by medical

treatment as comprehensive as it is vague, ranging all the way from bread-pills and asafetida to ovariectomy, have at last reached a point where they have not one force left with which to cope with the tenderest possible conditions of life. The drawn mouth, the emaciation, the quick, nervous eye, the interciliary ridges and furrows, together with the never-ending list of complaints, will recall cases that have fallen victims to infectious or organic disease, or have faded away as simply unfit to survive.

The prophylactic measures that the foregoing ideas suggest obviously comprehend certain advice to the mother of each newborn babe that opens a field too broad for me to enter and a responsibility too great for me to assume.

The Medical News.

Established in 1843.

A WEEKLY MEDICAL NEWSPAPER.

Subscription, \$4.00 per Annum.

The American Journal
OF THE
Medical Sciences.

Established in 1820.

A MONTHLY MEDICAL MAGAZINE.

Subscription, \$4.00 per Annum.

COMMUTATION RATE, \$7.50 PER ANNUM.

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